

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 053

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY SAIGON

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

COMUSSAG NKP THAI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PHNOM PENH 5682

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MOPS, SWEL, EAID, CB

SUBJ: NEAK LUONG -- ON THE EVE OF ITS MAJOR TEST

1. SUMMARY. AS INTELLIGENCE INDICATES THAT A MAJOR NEW ENEMY EFFORT IS ABOUT TO BE MADE TO ELIMINATE THE BANAM/ NEAK LUONG ENCLAVE, THIS MESSAGE DISCUSSES WHAT THE DRY SEASON OFFENSIVE HAS BROUGHT TO NEAK LUONG, RELATIVE STRENGTHS OF FORCES, THE PLIGHT OF THE REFUGEES, AND THE RESUPPLY PROBLEM. NEAK LUONG IS IMPORTANT TO THE DEFENSE OF PHNOM PENH BY REASON OF THE SIZEABLE ENEMY FORCE DIRECTED AGAINST IT. IT SHOULD BE ABLE TO HOLD. IF IT DOESN'T THE RESULT WILL SOON BE AN INCREASED THREAT TO THE CAPITAL. END SUMMARY.

2. IN PEACETIME CAMBODIA'S HIGHWAY ONE LED SOUTHEAST OUT OF PHNOM PENH SOME 60 KILOMETERS ALONG THE WEST BANK OF THE MEKONG RIVER TO A FERRY CROSSING, OPPOSITE THE SMALL TOWN OF NEAK LUONG. AFTER THE FERRY CROSSING, THE ROAD CONTINUED THROUGH NEAK LUONG TOWN TO SVAY RIENG AND EVENTUALLY TO SAIGON. PRIOR TO THE OPENING OF THE CURRENT DRY SEASON OFFENSIVE ON JANUARY 1, THE GKR CON-
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TROLLED THE LAND ROUTE BETWEEN PHNOM PENH AND NEAK LUONG,

WHICH HAD A NORMAL POPULATION OF SOME 11 TO 15,000 PEOPLE. THIS INCLUDED A SMALL REFUGEE POPULATION, WHICH WAS BEING ASSISTED BY THE MINISTRY OF REFUGEES AND THE VOLUNTARY AGENCIES IN A SERIES OF DRY SEASON RICE CULTIVATION PROJECTS TALLING SOME 2,500 HECTARES AROUND THE PERIMETER OF THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED AREA.

3. IN LESS THAN THREE MONTHS NEAK LUONG HAS BECOME AN ENCLAVE CONTAINING AS MANY AS 70 TO 80,000 PEOPLE, SURROUNDED BY SOME SEVEN KHMER COMMUNIST REGIMENTS, WITH NO MEANS OF SUPPLY EXCEPT BY AIR DROP. CURRENT INTELLIGENCE INDICATES THAT THE NEEMY IS ON THE VERGE OF LAUNCHING A MAJOR EFFORT BY A COORDINATED ATTACK FROM ALL SIDES TO ELIMINATE THE NEAK LUONG/BANAM ENCLAVE.

4. IN THE FIRST WEEKS OF JANUARY, THE KC OFFENSIVE ROLLED UP ALL FANK FORCES ON HIGHWAY 1 FOR A STRETCH OF 35 TO 40 KILOMETERS NORTH OF THE FERRY CROSSING ON THE WEST BANK, WHERE HERE REMAINED A SMALL BRIDGEHEAD, SUBJECT TO INCREASING PRESSURE. AS THIS WAS HAPPENING, REFUGEES STREAMED DOWN THE ROAD INTO NEAK LUONG. FANK ALSO REINFORCED NEAK LUONG FOR USE AS A STAGING BASE FOR FANK EFFORTS TO RE-ESTABLISH LOST POSITIONS ALONG THE WEST BANK OF THE MEKONG SOUTH OF NEAK LUONG, AS PART OF A MAJOR EFFORT TO REOPEN THE RIVER FOR MEKONG CONVOYS. SUCH EFFORTS FAILED, AS RE-ESTABLISHED POSITIONS WERE OVERRUN OR WITHDRAWN WITH VARYING FANK SUCCESS IN EXTRACTING THE NUMEROUS BATTALIONS THAT HAD BEEN COMMITTED TO THOSE OPERATIONS. FANK FORCES WERE FINALLY FORCED TO WITHDRAW FROM THE WEST BANK FERRY-CROSSING POSITION IN MID-MARCH, AND THE ENEMY FOLLOWED UP BY SEIZING TWO SIZEABLE ISLANDS IN THE MEKONG (KOH CHAMROEUN OPPOSITE NEAK LUONG, AND KOH TACHOI FARTHER NORTH OPPOSITE THE VILLAGE OF BANAM).

5. FANK STRENGTH. A RECENT DAO REPORT LISTED SOME 4,355 FANK PERSONNEL NOW MANNING THE ENCLAVE, DIVDED UP INTO THE REMNANTS OF SOME SCATTERED ELEMENTS OF AT LEAST 4 NUMBERED BRIGADES, SOME NAVAL INFANTRY, AND TERRITORIAL FORCES. ON THECOMMAND SIDE, A MEKONG

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SPECIAL ZONE WAS CREATED AND COMMAND WAS SHIFTED FROM THE NAVY TO BG NOP PARAMOUN, MILITARY GOVERNOR OF THE 6TH MILITARY REGION, IN WHICH NEAK LUONG IS LOCATED THOUGH THE REGIONAL CAPITAL IS AT SVAY RIENG. GENERAL PARAMOUN HAVING BEEN SIDELINED BY ILLNESS, THE COMMAND IS NOW HELD BY BG LIM SISAATH, WHO IS ON LOAN FROM HIS POSITION AS THE MILITARY COMMANDER AT KOMPONG CHAM.

6. ENEMY FORCES. OPERATIONS ALONG THE LOWER MEKONG HAVE BEEN LARGELY CONDUCTED BY FORCES FROM THE KC EASTERN REGION (REGION 203), ALTHOUGH THE KC SPECIAL REGION 12TH BRIGADE WAS EMPLOYED FARTHER SOUTH ON THE WEST BANK OF THE RIVER. AT THE PRESENT TIME, WE BELIEVE THAT THE FOLLOWING UNITS, COMPRISING THE KC SECOND DIVISION (EASTERN REGION), ARE LOCATED ON THE EAST BANK AROUND THE NEAK LUONG ENCLAVE: THE 124, 128, 192 AND 247 KC REGIMENTS, WITH STRONG ARTILLERY SUPPORT FROM THE 175TH KC (HEAVY WEAPONS) REGIMENT. ON THE WEST BANK AND ON THE TWO ISLANDS MENTIONED ABOVE, ARE TO BE FOUND THE 126TH AND 173RD REGIMENTS OF THE KC FIRST DIVISION, ALSO WITH CONSIDERABLE HEAVY WEAPONS SUPPORT. NUMBERS ARE MORE DIFFICULT TO ESTIMATE, BU THE RANGE OF ENEMY EFFECTIVES MIGHT RUN FROM 8,000 TO 9,000 ON BOTH BANKS TOGETHER.

7. THE REFUGEE SITUATION. ON MID-FEBRUARY THE GKR WAS ESTIMATING 7,000 REFUGEE FAMILIES, TOTALING NEARLY 32,000 PEOPLE, OF WHOM 90 PERCENT HAD ENTERED THE NEAK LUONG ENCLAVE SINCE JANUARY 1. CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES HAD MEDICAL AND FOOD DISTRIBUTION TEAMS THERE, ASSISTING A MINISTRY OF REFUGEES TEAM. THE FOOD SITUATION WAS DESPERATE EVEN THEN, AND CRS HAD ORGANIZED SOUP KITCHENS, FEEDING A THIN RICE GRUEL TWICE A DAY TO SOME 5,000 TO 7,000 CHILDREN AND ADULTS DAILY. ON FEBRUARY 24, AS THE NOOSE TIGHTENED AROUND THE ENCLAVE AND THE ATTACKS BY ARTILLERY, ROCKETS AND MORTARS BECAME MORE INTENSE, THE CRS AND MINREFUGEES TEAMS HAD TO BE EXTRACTED BY AN AIR AMERICA HELICOPTER, DEPARTING UNDER FIRE.

8. A CRS AMERICAN EMPLOYEE RETURNED TO NEAK LUONG TO SPENT THE 13TH AND 14TH OF MARCH THERE. EACH OF THESE
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DAYS THERE WERE 300 TO 500 ROUNDS ON THE CITY. AN ENEMY GROUND ATTACK HAD REACHED WITHIN ONE KILOMETER OF THE EASTERN EDGE OF THE CITY. ON BOTH THE 11TH AND 12TH THERE WERE 10 KILLED AND 100 WOUNDED, AND ON THE CRS EMPLOYEE'S ARRIVAL ON THE 13TH OVER 200 WOUNDED WERE AWAITING HELICOPTER EVACUATION TO PHNOM PENH. ON THE MORNING OF THE 14TH, SEVERAL ROUNDS LANDED IN A CROWDED MARKET AREA WHICH KILLED 20 AND WOUNDED 60 CIVILIANS WITHIN MINUTES. THE CIVILIAN HOSPITAL HD BEEN HIT SEVERAL TIMES, AND WAS VIRTUALLY OUT OF COMMISSION. MEANWHILE, CRS FEEDING PROGRAMS CONTINUED WITH LOCAL KHMER EMPLOYEES AND WITH ENOUGH STOCKS ON HAND TO CONTINUE THE FORTIFIED SOUP FEEDING FOR ANOTHER 3 TO 4 WEEKS FOR 3,000 CHILDREN AND 2,000 ADULTS.

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9. IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT THERE HAVE BEEN NO KHMER NAVY CONVOYS FOR RESUPPLY TO NEAK LUONG SINCE MARCH 12, AND NO MORE ARE LIKELY IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. DAILY RICE REQUIREMENTS, MILITARY AND CIVILIAN, COME TO 35 METRIC TONS. THESE, AS WELL AS MILITARY RESUPPLY REQUIREMENTS, MUST NOW BE MET EXCLUSIVELY FROM AIR DROPS, CARRIED OUT BY THE BIRD AIR C-130 OPERATION FROM THAILAND. QUITE FRANKLY, THE AIR DROPS OF RICE TO NEAK LUONG IN RECENT DAYS HAVE NOT BEEN ADEQUATE, AND WE HAVE RECEIVED REPORTS THAT THE MILITARY COMMAND HAS HAD PROBLEMS WITH HUNGRY CIVILIANS RUNNING OUT ON THE DROP ZONE AND FIGHTING FOR THEIR SHARE OF THE PARACHUTED RICE. WARNING SHOTS HAVE HAD TO BE EMPLOYED ON OCCASION.

10. ANOTHER REPORT FROM NEAK LUONG DATED A WEEK AGO SAYS THAT IN ONE HALF OF THE TOWN NEARLY ALL PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND VILLAGERS' HOMES HAVE BEEN SET AFIRE AND DESTROYED BY KC TROOPS IN ATTACKS, WHILE IN THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TOWN THE HOMES HAVE BEEN DESTROYED BY FIRES SET BY HEAVY WEAPONS ATTACKS. MOST OF THE POPULATION ARE LIVING IN TRENCHES FOR PROTECTION. WHILE CIVILIAN MORALE IS SAID TO BE LOW, STORIES OF KC ATROCITIES

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COMMITTED IN THE AREA, AS RELATED BY INCOMING REFUGEES, EFFECTIVELY DETER THOUGHTS OF DEFECTION TO THE OTHER SIDE. ONE ENTIRE NEARBY VILLAGE IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN MASSACRED BY KC TROOPS.

11. AND SO THE 70,000 OR SO MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN OF NEAK LUONG REMAINED ENCLOSED IN AN ENCLAVE PERHAPS 5 TO 6 MILES NORTH AND SOUTH ALONG THE RIVER BANK AND PERHAPS A MILE TO A MILE AND A HALF IN DEPTH, WITH STRONG ENEMY FORCES ON ALL SIDES, INCLUDING POSITIONS ON THE ISLAND IN THE RIVER. THE DAILY RAIN OF FIRE BY 105MM HOWITZERS, 75MM RECOILLESS RIFLES, 107MM ROCKETS, AND HEAVY AND LIGHT MACHINE GUNS CONTINUES TO TAKE ITS TOLL. BUT THE FANK FORCES OF NEAK LUONG HAVE FOUGHT BACK, INFLECTING OVER 500 KILLED IN ACTION ON THE ENEMY IN THE MONTH OF MARCH ALONE. AND EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, FROM THE OVERALL VIEW OF THE WAR THESE DAYS, THEY HAVE SUCCEEDED IN FIXING MOST OF TWO KC DIVISIONS THAT OTHERWISE WOULD BE DEPLOYED AGAINST THE SOUTHERN AND EASTERN PERIMETERS OF PHNOM PENH, AREAS THAT ARE ALL TOO THINLY HELD BY FANK. PROPERLY RE-SUPPLIED, PROPERLY LED, WE BELIEVE NEAK LUONG COULD BE MADE TO HOLD, INFLECTING SUCH SEVERE CASUALTIES ON THE ENEMY THAT HE WOULD EVENTUALLY GIVE UP THE ATTACK. THE EYES OF MANY IN PHNOM PENH WILL BE ON THE BATTLE TO THE SOUTH. MEANWHILE, MOST HERE ARE MINDFUL OF THE SERIOUS PLIGHT OF THE CIVILIAN POPULATION, AND ABOVE ALL THE REFUGEES.

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